

Kol NIdre 5779 - Emet

Sometimes, when working with our B'nai Mitzvah students, they ask me if the stories in Torah really happened. Did God really create Adam and Eve as the first human beings? Did God destroy the world with a flood in the story of Noah? Did God really cause the 10 plagues in Egypt and split the Sea of Reeds? My standard reply is to ask them what kinds of literature they learn about in school. Almost always, they reply that there is fiction and nonfiction literature. They then define fiction as fake or not true, and non-fiction as true. "So, which is Torah," I say. That's when they get uncomfortable. If they say Torah is non-fiction, they believe they are saying that God literally created the world in seven days, Adam and Eve are historical fact, and all the science they learned in school is false and in contradiction to the Torah. If they reply that Torah is fiction, they think that means it's all just made up and false, and most of them don't want to say that to their Rabbi. So I give them a third way, "For Jews, there are three kinds of literature, there is fiction, non-fiction and Torah.

Here's what I mean,

Adam the first man was created alone. **The Sages taught Adam was created alone, and for what reason? So that the heretics will not say: There are many authorities in Heaven,** and each created a different person.

There is truth in the idea that all humanity, and all life comes from the same source.

Alternatively, Adam was created alone due to the righteous and due to the wicked. It was so that the righteous will not say: **We are the children of the righteous,** and righteousness is natural for us, so there is no need for us to exert ourselves to be righteous, **and** so that **the wicked** will not say: **We are the children of the wicked** and cannot change our ways.

There is truth in the idea that we are not defined by our ancestry or genetics alone, that we each hold the power to choose a path of right or wrong.

Alternatively, he was created alone **due to the families, so that the families will not quarrel with each other,** each one boasting of the heritage of their progenitor.

There is truth in the idea that all people are created equally.

The Sages taught in a *baraita* (*Tosefta* 8:5): The fact that Adam the first man was created alone serves **to declare the greatness of the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, as a person stamps several coins with one seal, and they are all similar to each other. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamps all people with the seal of Adam the first man, and not one of them is similar to another. As it is stated: “It is changed like clay under the seal and they stand as a garment”** ([Job 38:14](#)). The verse describes people as being created “under the seal,” but their external appearance is different, just as garments can differ in appearance.¹

There is truth in the idea that despite our common origin, our ability to change and our equal status as families of humanity, every human being carries a spark of unique energy.

These are truths that can't exactly be verified with data or science. They are true because they are the stories that shape our perspective of the world. Torah is the inspiration for, and the vessel that holds this Truth.

Before there was scientific truth in modernity, Priests and Prophets were the tellers of True stories, the ones who distinguished good from evil. When a question was asked, religious texts were consulted. As time progressed, humans used reason to develop more sophisticated tools, and technology in pursuit of Truth, and we were able to see the world from new vantage points, through new lenses. What we saw changed our perspective about the universe. When we observed the stars with telescopes, we learned that we rotated around the sun instead of the sun rotating around us. When we looked into ourselves with powerful microscopes, we learned that all life is connected through a molecule called DNA. Science upended the myths that previously established the concept of truth in the world.

New science brought new stories, new understandings into the world but while these may have brought new truth to light these weren't all good for humanity. For example, if we abandon the idea that all people are created equally and try and make an argument that certain races are better than others because of DNA, we're heading down a path that can lead to very dark places for humanity. As Jews, we know this with all our soul, and we will never forget. The pseudoscience of racism has been discredited again and again, yet its persistence points to a danger.

¹ Sanhedrin 38a

Religious fundamentalism that rejects science is unmoored from the real world. The religious fundamentalist will claim, if your scientific data contradicts my fundamental religious beliefs, it's not true. Scientific fundamentalism that worships data above all and attempts to ignore the stories that shape us, whether the sacred stories told by religion or the moral principles of secular humanism, is unmoored from human flourishing.

Science has shown the factual errors of old stories like Columbus sailing over the edge of the world, yet amazingly there are those who still believe the world is flat. Since photos can be doctored, and the flood of information in the information age can be endless and fake, how can any of us know any truth at all? In the world we live, facts and data sets are endlessly argued. We are losing confidence in what used to be trusted sources when the government and the news media are at complete odds with one another. But we are in part responsible for this world where truth isn't truth, where there are alternative facts, and fake news. We have created the echo chambers on social media and within our communities where truth that doesn't conform to our beliefs about the world isn't even heard, and if it is heard, it is rejected as false.

There are those who think that maybe we should simply give up on the idea of truth all together. After all, your truth is different than my truth. Indeed, truth is the beginning of conflict after conflict, if my story is true, your story cannot be true.

There is a story in the Midrash that tries to capture this idea. When God desired to create human beings God convened the Heavenly court to see what was thought of the matter. Chesed, selfless love came down on the side that humans should be created, since humans would perform acts of kindness. Emet, Truth however was on the opposite side. Truth said, humans are entirely lies! Tzedek, justice, said, humans will do acts of justice, so humans should be created. Shalom, peace said do not create them, they are entirely dissension!

While Chesed and Tzedek focused on what humans would do in the world, Emet and Shalom focused on what the essence of humans would be. God took Emet, Truth and threw it to the Earth. While the rest of the angels continued to argue about what God should do, God went ahead and created human beings.

This is a rich midrash with many layers of interpretation. When God throws truth to to the ground, there is no truth to argue against the creation of humans anymore. Arguing with truth is pointless. So, one possible read of this Midrash is that in order to create we shouldn't worry about truth. Another interpretation is that if we didn't have truth in the world to fight about, then we would have peace. So maybe we should give up the fight for truth in the world.

But In the world of Midrash, which holds the essence of Rabbinic Judaism, one cannot help but understand multiple possibilities. That's because as soon as one understands one interpretation of a text in the midrash, there is immediately the words "Davar Acher - another interpretation."

Just as the Midrash recognized the danger of absolute Truth in creating conflict among human beings, Midrash recognized the danger of a world full of lies with no Truth. It's embodied in the Alef-Bet itself. See the Hebrew letters of Emet, א, מ, ת, are the first, middle, and last letter of the Alef-Bet. Each letter has a solid base. The impression of the word is thus that it is solidly based in the entirety of reality. The Hebrew letters for the word Lies, Sheker-shin, kuf, and resh, in contrast are all found next to each other, in the wrong order, at the end of the Alef-Bet, and each letter only has one point at its base. When looked at from the perspective of reality, it falls over. Every person holding their own version of truth ultimately will not stand in the world. That kind of truth is destined to be recognized as lies.

אבגדהוזחטיכלמנסעפצקרשת

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Every time we read from the Torah, the one honored with the blessings of the Aliyah concludes with the words *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam, asher natan lanu Torat Emet* - Blessed are you Adonai our God, Sovereign of Space and Time, who gave us a Torah of Truth. *V'chayei Olam Nata B'tocheinu* - and planted a seed of eternity within us. *Baruch Atah Adonai notein ha-Torah*. Blessed are you Adonai, who is giving Torah, in the present tense.

So which is it? Should we abandon the idea of truth since it creates conflict, or should we embrace truth because the alternative is a world that falls apart? What's the role of religious truth and scientific truth? When God threw Truth to the Earth, it remained here for us to discover. This is what was meant in Psalms when it was written, "Truth shall sprout from the earth." Truth has to be based in the real world, in facts and in observations, in order for it to sprout from the earth.

Before Emily and I were blessed with four children, we struggled with infertility. We had a plan for the first year of parenthood to coincide with the year we would spend in Israel. As the Yiddish saying goes, "We plan, and God laughs." After a year of trying, we began to get worried. For couples experiencing fertility, there is a terrible cycle of hope, anxiety and depression every month. Thankfully, science has learned a thing or two about fertility. We were fortunate to have a personal connection to a fertility specialist in St. Louis and came away from our appointment with a diagnosis of unexplained infertility, which is the explanation about 1/3 of the time for couples. We went through a treatment, our hope rose again a little more this time, then anxiety, then depression. I began the practice of going to the mikvah each month around the same time

that Emily would go. A mikvah is a ritual bath that Jewish women traditionally go to for a spiritual reset after every menstrual cycle. I found myself needing the spiritual reset too, and thought it might help our process, but a four months later we were studying in Israel, without our planned child, every month hope, anxiety and depression.

The cycle affected our spiritual lives. I found it more difficult to pray than I used to. I wondered if we were doing something wrong. The sound of children playing in parks and synagogues caused emotional pain instead of the joy we knew it was supposed to inspire. Even though we knew intellectually that we were young and healthy, that the chance of us eventually conceiving was high, we had no firm explanation for what was happening, all we knew was what it felt like. We began to consult another fertility specialist. Another cycle of hope, anxiety, and depression, just this time with someone watching. She suggested another course of the same treatment we went through the summer prior. It just so happened that this was the month, Emily confided to someone about what we were going through. This person told Emily of a mikvah in Jerusalem that was known to be helpful for women who were struggling with infertility. So the same month that we were engaged in the ritual of nightly injections of fertility medication was also the month after that special mikvah visit, and that was the month that the cycle of hope and anxiety ended with joy. The story we tell ourselves is not only a story about the miracle of science giving us options to address infertility that were not always available. The story we tell ourselves is not only a story about the miracle of that mikvah. We tell ourselves both stories, and they both end in the truth and the miracle of our daughters coming into the world.

In Atlanta, there are two Jewish organizations that embody this work. The [Jewish Fertility Foundation](#) supports couples struggling with infertility through grants helping cover the costs of IVF, and providing emotional support through groups and resources. [MaCoM: The Metro Atlanta Community Mikvah](#) serves individuals and couples with Mikvah experiences that are open to creative rituals in a beautiful setting. They train “Mikvah guides” who understand how to utilize the Mikvah to best meet the ritual needs of our community.

When we say that God is “giving Torah,” we are called to understand our sacred stories with the best knowledge we have about the world right now--the world of religion AND science. The truth of the Torah goes much further than reporting historical occurrences. The Zohar teaches us that the words of the Torah are simply a garment for its true meaning.

Every time we pray and recite the Shema and it’s blessings, they conclude with the words *Adonai Eloheichem Emet* - Adonai Your God is a True God. When we state our belief in a True God, we are called to see the good not only through our own eyes of what is good for me, but what is good for all of God’s creation. This should lead us to make decisions about the future of humanity and our planet with both our sacred stories and what we know about the planet in mind.

As we pursue truth that begins with science, we should also recognize that all our knowledge is always contingent. We have the capacity to not abandon truth simply because there exists a *davar acher*, another possibility. On the contrary, *davar acher* does not mean that there is no

truth, or that there are multiple truths, rather that there are multiple perspectives to find our way to the same truth. The work of our time is to not abandon truth altogether, but to find it sprouting from the earth, and recognizing that there are multiple ways to get there. Rabbinic Judaism calls us to seek out *davar acher* - a different interpretation, so we can best understand the world around us.

I'm very proud that this year at Shearith we will be exploring the world of Truth, in both science and religion in partnership with the organization Sinai and Synapses who we received a grant from for their program Scientists in Synagogues. Our great leadership team of Professors Joshua Weitz, Paul Wolpe and Rabbi Jonathan Crane have put together a series titled "The Science of Doing Good" These Sunday evening events will bring a world-class scholars from Atlanta in dialogue with our world-class scholar congregants. They'll be exploring topics like, "Inculcating Altruism," "The Evolution of Fairness," "Social Microbes and Symbiosis," and "Global Good: Social Science and Social Justice."



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
Your Intown Synagogue

presents:
THE SCIENCE OF DOING GOOD

Sunday, October 7, 7:30-9:00PM • INCULCATING ALTRUISM
Philippe Rochat, Professor of Psychology (Emory) will discuss with Marshall Duke such questions as:
How do we develop and/or inculcate altruism?
When and how does selflessness arise in the human mind?
How, ultimately, can we raise good kids?

Sunday, December 9, 7:30-9:00PM • PHILANTHROPY PANEL
A panel conversation on the ethics of philanthropy.
Jay Kaiman • Marcus Foundation
Alicia Phillipp • Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta
AJ Robinson • Central Atlanta Progress
Jennifer Hill • ArtsBridge Foundation

Sunday, January 27, 7:30-9:00PM • EVOLUTION OF FAIRNESS
Sarah Brosnan, Professor of Psychology, Philosophy and Neuroscience (Georgia State University) will discuss with Jonathan Crane about studying aspects of fairness in other, non-verbal, species, and the evolution of fairness in both non-human primates and homo sapiens.

Sunday, March 24, 7:30-9:00PM • SOCIAL MICROBES AND SYMBIOSIS
Nicole Gerardo, Professor of Biology (Emory) will discuss with Joshua Weitz the nature of competition, cooperation and symbiosis among microbes, between them and host organisms, and the biological roots of doing well by and for neighbors.

Sunday, May 5, 7:30-9:00PM • GLOBAL GOOD: SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
Andra Gillespie, Professor of Political Science (Emory) will discuss with Paul Root Wolpe race relations, social justice, solidarity and the politics of doing good in the contemporary age.

 **Scientists in Synagogues**

This program is supported by Scientists in Synagogues, run by Sinai and Synapses in consultation with the AAAS Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

I believe with all my heart that what we learn about the world through Science is Torah, and that our sacred texts contain eternal truth that is beyond our ability to measure with our current tools and knowledge. Judaism offers us a way to pursue truth so that it sprouts from the Earth, so that we can understand multiple perspectives on that eternal truth without losing our own.